

Roselli's 'Life of Crime' Began With Fire at 16

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The way Johnny Roselli told the story, his run-running, card-cheating, shake-down "life of crime" had roots in the cold December of 1911 when he stepped onto Ellis Island — a poor, six-year-old immigrant clinging to his mother.

In an autobiography that officials say Roselli wrote in 1970 as a defense against U.S. attempts to deport him — a copy of which has been obtained by The Herald — he didn't include government assass-

sin' among the bad jobs he had pulled.

But his attempts on the life of Fidel Castro, which he argued was another reason the United States shouldn't kick him out of the country, may have been the reason he was killed this summer.

"I HAVE a good family," the eight-page, typewritten "Personal and Family History of John Roselli" states.

"All of the actions that I have taken were obviously done to keep my family away from my nefarious schemes and life. Otherwise,

they would not have had a normal chance for survival."

Roselli spent most of his life as a rather unpublicized, lesser-known organized crime figure.

When the Senate Intelligence Committee forced him last year to testify about his role in the Castro plot, Roselli received the widespread notoriety he said he feared.

There are still important missing chapters in the Johnny Roselli story and somewhere along his 71-year path are the clues to fill in the gaps.

ROSELLI WROTE that his first

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criminal act was at age 16. Encouraged and guided by his step-father, he said he tried to burn out part of the family house in Somerville, Mass., so his step-father could get insurance money for needed improvements.

It didn't work.

"We had a cast-iron stove behind which there was always laundry and diapers hanging on a line. He told me how to start a fire, making it red hot and make it appear that the rags had dropped onto the stove and accidentally started the fire."

"This is when my step-father started me on my life of crime," the autobiography states.

"I followed the instructions and started the fire. I went across the street and sat on the curbstone to watch it burn. I thought it took hold because smoke and fire was coming out of the roof, but lo and behold, to my surprise, the firemen were there in about three minutes to put it out."

ROSELLI WROTE that he later discovered that the fire station was just around the corner, across the street from his step-father's butcher shop. "They could not only smell the smoke, they could see it."

Roselli virtually ignores in the autobiography his movements in the 1950s and 1960s. His gambling

AND like the many unbecameled figures who have told their stories

CONTINUATION
'Roselli's life in crime'

In the dozen years since Joe Valachi revealed the inner workings of what he called La Cosa Nostra and others have called the Mafia — Roselli lays some blame for his way of life on the struggle he faced as an Italian immigrant.

"I was born in 1905 in Esperia, Italy," the autobiography begins. His birthday was July 4.

He, his mother and brothers and sisters came to America to be with his father, Vincenzo, who had previously emigrated to Boston.

"I ENTERED the first grade in East Boston. There was a language barrier but nevertheless I was promoted to the second grade the following year and then the third grade. I stopped talking Italian because of the beatings I received in school."

Roselli learned how to fight back. "By the time I reached the fourth grade, the tables were turned a little," he wrote, without further explanation.

After his father died, the family moved to Somerville where Roselli's mother met and married Liberato Cianciulli, the step-father he said taught him about arson.

By the time of the arson attempt,

Roselli had left school, after the seventh grade, and because "it was getting crowded" at home he moved out on his own. "I started helling around on Maverick Street where all the wise guys were."

"ABOUT THE LATTER part of 1922 I began running errands for a guy named Sy ... delivering packages. One time I was arrested and to my surprise, because I have always had an aversion to drug traffic, I was charged with a narcotics violation."

Investigators now say they do not have any evidence of Roselli's further direct involvement in drug traffic or violent crimes, although he has always been associated with figures linked to violence.

Arrested again in Cambridge for stealing \$50, Roselli moved to New York where he worked at one of the only legitimate jobs he is known to have had — a third-class lineman for the telephone company. He quit after three months and moved to Chicago.

There, the heritage Roselli had tried to run from again became important to his associates who suggested "I have an Italian name."

SO THE MAN who had been

born Filippo Sacco for the first time took the name Roselli — after Cosmo Roselli "who finished the Sistine Chapel after Michaelangelo. I read the name in an encyclopedia."

Roselli continued west. "On the train (to California) I became acquainted with a man who wore a straw hat. This seemed strange to me because it was February."

The man asked Roselli to get him two bottles of bootleg scotch, not a hard job for Roselli, who had his contacts back in Chicago through the Al Capone organization.

"It cost me ten dollars and he paid me twenty. From then on I was a bootlegger."

THROUGHOUT, Roselli shows emotion once. When he went back East to visit his brother who was dying of tuberculosis. At the hospital he saw "my brother in an oxygen tent holding the cross with Jesus in his hand. When he saw me he pleaded with me not to let him die. This affected me deeply. He died in my arms 10 minutes later."

Roselli ends his story with his World War II army service — which ended when he was convicted of mail fraud, according to authorities. When he died, Roselli's Washington attorneys were chal-

lenging in court his dishonorable discharge.

The Justice Department's pursuit of Roselli in recent years centered on Roselli's failure to register as an alien.

Roselli has claimed he had always been advised by attorneys that his name change — including the falsifying of a birth certificate in Chicago in 1936 — was within the bounds of the law.

ROSELLI HAD been labeled a "fixer," the man who ran the West Coast gambling operation for the Chicago syndicate and later, mob gambling interests in Cuba in pre-Castro days.

His Chicago boss was Sam (Momo) Giancana, also involved in the CIA plot against Castro. Giancana was shot to death last year just as U.S. Senate investigators were about to question him about the plot.

That murder frightened Roselli. Investigators say that Roselli had more than patriotism — which he claimed was his reason — in mind when he agreed to help the CIA murder Castro during the Bay of Pigs operation.

The CIA plot was his ace-in-the-hole defense against deportation for many years and seemed particularly effective in the 1960s when

the Justice Department was vigorously trying to deport him.

ROSELLI CALLED his old CIA buddies, Senate testimony reveals, and they were able to cool the fires at the Justice Department.

But somehow, things got hot again. Roselli testified three times in the past year to the Senate committee about his CIA connections.

He was meeting with police-identified gangsters on the West Coast, including Charlie (The Blade) Tourine of Miami Beach — recently indicted in San Francisco for allegedly conspiring to bring prostitution and gambling to well-paid and isolated workers on the Alaska pipeline.

Five years ago he appeared before a grand jury in Los Angeles which later indicted three Senate-identified Mafia members and a corporation for conspiring to maintain hidden interests in a Las Vegas hotel. Roselli still held an interest in the hotel's gift shop at the time of his death.

HIS FRIENDSHIP with Judith Campbell Exner — the woman who has claimed to have had an intimate relationship with John F. Kennedy — became known.

And, it was learned just recently, Roselli told his attorney in 1967 that he knew about Castro agents in the United States whom he believed were prime suspects in a Castro-originated conspiracy to murder Kennedy.

A lot of people had come to know about Johnny Roselli.

It wasn't like the old days when, as a handsome, flamboyant ladies' man and high-roller on the West Coast, he could send money home to his family "with the admonition not to tell the children where the money came from and to forget me . . . where I didn't have the normal chance for survival, at least I wanted to give them an opportunity."